

Voluntary program first step of a national system for livestock identification & tracking

ODA unveils test program of premises registration

February 16, 2005...The state of Oregon is taking the first step towards a nationwide program ultimately designed to identify all livestock as well as track their movement and location. Starting this week, a voluntary premises registration program will begin assigning identification numbers to all physical locations in Oregon where livestock animals may be found. The test program is made possible through a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant that encourages individual states or groups of states to develop and test animal tracking programs.

"The United States is interested in establishing a national program to track livestock species," says Dr. Don Hansen, state veterinarian with the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "The goal is to protect the health of the livestock animal industry and be able to trace and control outbreaks of specific diseases of concern within a 48-hour period of time after they are discovered."

Oregon is part of this effort through a system operated by ODA.

The first step in this program is the identification and registration of premises throughout the state. A premises is a unique, identifiable physical location where livestock can be found. This includes farms, ranches, pastures, feedlots, slaughter facilities, and other locations. The registration can be done by producers and livestock handlers via the internet, or by calling ODA's Animal Health Division. A nationally unique seven-digit number will then be assigned to the property location, not the owner.

"Knowing where animals are located will be the first step in a system that ultimately will provide better protection for livestock animals and consumers," says Hansen.

The likely goal of the second phase is to have every livestock animal individually identified and to have its movement traced at specific times in its life. Individually identified animals would be issued a unique 15-digit number that can be used to track movements from premises to premises.

It is safe to say that the events of September 11, 2001 elevated the level of concern for many issues, including animal disease control. Whether intentionally or unintentionally introduced, diseases of concern could wreak havoc on the agriculture industry. The first-ever detection of BSE in the U.S. December 23, 2003 also intensified public interest in a national animal identification program.

"Protecting the health of our herds is the primary concern under the National Animal Identification System (NAIS)," says Hansen, referring to the specific initiative being directed by USDA in cooperation with individual states. "The effort should reduce the financial and social impacts of animal health incidents. If you can actually curtail the spread of something like foot-and-mouth disease within 48 hours, that could save billions of dollars. The system can also help gain market access and

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perhaps increase consumer demand."

The European Union, Canada, and Australia already have animal identification systems in place. Export markets for U.S. livestock products are increasingly demanding a similar program for the United States. The domestic marketplace is also joining the chorus.

"American consumers are telling us they have more confidence in an identified product," says Hansen. "Tracking an animal's movement through commerce may provide comfort to consumers. A completed and workable animal identification system should continue the confidence in American animal products."

Once fully operational, the NAIS could trace a sick animal or a group of animals back to the herd or premises that is the source of infection. The system will also trace potentially exposed animals that were moved off the premises before the disease outbreak was discovered, or came into contact with the infected animals. In animal disease control, every moment saved can make a huge difference in successfully controlling the outbreak.

Tracy Junge is ODA's National Animal Identification System Coordinator and has been asking Oregon's livestock industry about how it does business.

"We are trying to find out from producers and animal handlers how to best fit the national system into their way of doing business," says Junge. "We want to create as little time loss, cost, or trouble for them as possible while still achieving the 48-hour traceability. In an attempt to enhance our success, we want to make it easy for the producer and handler to be compliant."

Should a national premises registration program become mandatory, as expected, and is coupled with an animal identification component in the next phase, the success of the current grant-funded test programs throughout the U.S. will be necessary. ODA's current grant program is aimed at dairy cattle—both cull cows that are transported through market channels and young calves that leave their original premises, primarily out of state. Another program—the Northwest Pilot Project—is funding Oregon cattlemen, deals primarily with beef cattle, and does not directly involve ODA, although its goals are similar.

ODA's program begins this week with the voluntary effort to register premises. The same test program is being tried in California and Arizona. ODA's website at <oregon.gov/ODA/AHID> allows producers and handlers to register a premises online. At completion, they will be issued a premises ID number that can be kept permanently. Those wishing to register by phone can call (503) 986-4680 to receive the ID number.

Junge and others are anxious to see what happens. She emphasizes that the current system is voluntary and the information remains confidential.

"Some people will jump on the bandwagon and get it done while others will stand back and watch for now," says Junge. "We want to encourage people to register. It does not commit them to do anything else."

As of this week, ODA is open for business when it comes to premises registration.

For more information, contact Dr. Don Hansen or Tracy Junge at (503) 986-4680.